

# **COLLECTION OVERVIEW**

## **AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE**

### **I. SCOPE**

This overview deals with the popular culture of the peoples of the United States. Popular culture is defined here as popular written literature and broadcasting, popular music, popular dance and theater, certain decorative arts, sports and recreation, and other cultural aspects of social life distinguished by their broad based presence across ethnic, social, and regional groupings.

For students of popular culture, books and magazines are important, as are music and recorded sound, television and radio broadcasts, prints and photographs, motion pictures, newspapers, and a variety of artifacts and archives. Illustrations, advertisements, and representations of everyday life found in conventional library materials such as popular magazines are useful for research in popular culture. Many materials that might be useful for popular culture research, however, such as current retail and trade catalogs, advertisements, greeting cards, political ephemera, and three-dimensional objects and artifacts, are not routinely collected by the Library. For additional information, other Overviews and Collections Policy Statements may be consulted: U.S. History and Music Collections Policy Statements and American Literature Collection Overview.

### **II. SIZE**

Popular culture has no universal definition and the diffuseness of the subject makes it difficult to estimate the size of the Library's popular culture collections. In addition to monographs, the Library owns many thousands of newspaper and serial titles, including many popular magazines from all periods, and extensive collections of manuscript materials, many of which are relevant to American popular culture and to interdisciplinary topics such as gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. The Library also has very extensive collections of non-book materials useful for the study of American popular culture. These include documentary photographs, architectural drawings, posters, prints, maps, materials such as oral histories in audio formats, sheet music, television programs, newsreel footage, and motion picture materials. The Library also has a sizeable collection of contemporary American software, including games, and other electronic products and programs.

### **III. GENERAL RESEARCH STRENGTHS**

The Library's status as the nation's Copyright depository library has meant that the Library's collections have historically been more eclectic and more democratic than many comparable academic research institutions. Although publications that are strictly vanity press materials are normally excluded from the Library's collections, the Library has distinguished (and historically continuous) collections of mass-market fiction and magazines, self-help, humor, and advice books, popular philosophy and theology, as well

as a collection of comic books and graphic novels.

Foreign materials held by the Library are useful not only for the study of U.S. culture from foreign perspectives, but also for comparative studies of U.S. and other historical, national, and regional cultures. The Library collects materials in approximately 480 languages.

#### **IV. AREAS OF DISTINCTION**

Although several specific collections and divisions are mentioned here, materials in every Library reading room or division could be useful for research on popular culture topics.

The Library's collections are strong in most areas of popular fiction, and include collections of trade paperbacks in American genres such as romance novels, mysteries, science fiction, pulp fiction, and westerns. The Dime Novel collection held in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division consists of more than 40,000-thousand titles. Rare Book also holds the Theater Playbills Collections, and a collection of 4,000 nineteenth-century Broadside songs. The Library's Children's Literature Center has a sizeable collection of "pop-up" books for children. Juvenile collections are enhanced by the presence of large numbers of foreign children's books useful for comparative purposes. The Library's comic book collections also merit mention. The Library attempts to acquire some ephemeral materials from ethnic, gender-based, or alternative communities. These include posters held in the Prints and Photographs division, and a number of newspaper format materials held in the Serial and Government Publications Division as well as serial publications throughout the General Collections.

The Library's collections of sports and recreation materials are quite strong, particularly in serial publications. The Prints and Photographs Division owns a fine collection of baseball cards from the early twentieth century. In the decorative arts, the Library's collections are quite comprehensive, especially in nineteenth and twentieth-century journals and trade publications, and in individual monographs covering a specific topic. Microformat collections of trade catalogs from other institutions supplement LC's collections. The Library's collections of pattern books and guidebooks on a variety of needlework and handwork are also valuable resources. In addition, extensive collections on cookery, how-to manuals, and "do-it-yourself" publications document popular trends.

The American Folklife Center archive contains over 300,000 hours of sound recordings, as well as millions of photographic, film, video, manuscript, and electronic media. It is the largest collection of traditional cultural expression in the country, containing the seeds of much American popular song, music, dance, narrative, crafts and design. Its field recordings, dating from 1890 to the present day and ranging from wax cylinders and lacquer discs to computer-stored sound files, contain the sources of such American popular music as the blues, bluegrass, country music, jazz, and world music. Among the Center's many recordings are live performances by singers and storytellers at festivals and concerts, including festival recordings and other documents from the International Storytelling Foundation, which has been popularizing traditional storytelling for many

years. The archive includes an extensive collection of nineteenth-century pocket songsters-the first medium to spread traditional songs across cultural boundaries. The Center also documents the popular culture of other countries; for example, its collection of over 8,000 Brazilian popular literature chapbooks ("literature de cordel") usually sold in market places. The Library's folklife collections are unsurpassed as a source for the origins and development of American and international popular culture. The Library's Prints and Photographs Division has important and often unique collections of American documentary photographs and popular prints and illustrations. In the Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division extensive collections include television programs, newsreels, scripts, feature films, and films in many formats that document the development of this genre. The Music Division and Performing Arts Reading Room house an extensive collection of sheet music, songbooks, and popular song and sound recordings. Each of these collections is extremely strong.

## **V. ELECTRONIC RESOURCES**

Electronic databases to which the Library of Congress subscribes cover a broad range of topics applicable to the study of American popular culture. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of popular culture, almost all databases, both general and specific, include valuable information related to this field. These databases and electronic sources include social sciences, psychology, arts and humanities, history, biographical, minority studies, and numerous other applicable subjects. Some titles offer both current and retrospective coverage.

The Library also harvests websites in areas that strongly relate to national and international popular culture. The Web Archiving project includes such topics as Presidential, Congressional, and statewide elections, Olympics, the War in Iraq, the Papal Transition, September 11, 2001, the War in Darfur, and other topics.

The American Memory project provides free and open access through the Internet to written and spoken words, sound recordings, still and moving images, prints, maps, and sheet music that document the American experience. It is a digital record of American history and creativity. These materials, from the collections of the Library of Congress and other institutions, chronicle historical events, people, places, and ideas that continue to shape America, serving the public as a resource for education and lifelong learning.

Other sites available through the LC home page with popular culture content include the *Performing Arts Encyclopedia* (formerly known as "*LC Presents*" and *I Hear America Singing*) as well as web casts of readings, presentations, and programs which number in the hundreds.

## **VI. WEAKNESSES/EXCLUSIONS**

In general, the Library's collections are unparalleled. The Library did not collect paperback-only fiction titles until recently; therefore historical collections in this area are

weak. Many popular titles (in a variety of subjects and genres) are missing or damaged. The Library's collection of small and alternative press publications is not as extensive as other archives and libraries, although the collections are supplemented by a number of microform collections for materials not owned in the original. The Library is not particularly strong in sexually explicit materials, whatever their medium. Currently, the Library excludes print or electronic versions of most contemporary retail and trade catalogs, advertising flyers and mass-mailings. In addition the Library excludes spam, blogs, email, listservs, or other electronic social networking or communications sources from its current collecting policies.

Like many other collections in the Library of Congress, the popular culture collections have suffered some mutilation and loss. As many of these books and serials are difficult and expensive to replace, these losses affect the quality of the collections. Regarding missing serials holdings, the lack of a visible file (the old Serial Record file) to indicate exact holdings further complicates being able to determine what issues are actually missing from the collections.